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[Reprinted from the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF OBSTETRICS AND DISEASES
OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN, Vol. XXI., September, 1888.]



THE SO-CALLED PHYSIOLOGICAL ARGUMENT IN
OBSTETRICS.

BY

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Society, etc.

IN the April number of this JOURNAL was reported an address entitled the "Physiological Argument in Obstetric Studies and Practice," in which it is attempted to show that the management of labor upon the principle that it is a physiological process is not good practice, or, to use the orator's words, "to show that the physiological argument is fallacious." I have already placed myself somewhat voluminously on record as a partisan of the physiological or natural manner of managing labor, and had desired to court the good-will of the profession by henceforth keeping silent upon the subject. But when I see the most intelligent in the profession confounding truth with error, and fact with fiction, the danger that the less thoughtful will become deluded by their honest sophistry, and the lying-in woman become a still greater victim of meddlesome practices, makes it impossible for me to hold my peace.

At the very outset (p. 370, last line) the teachers of the

natural school of obstetricians are made to say, "The birth of a child is a physiological process, and therefore requires no assistance. Expulsion of the after-birth is a physiological process, and therefore requires, in natural cases, *no assistance*. The lower animals—the dumb beasts—bring forth their young without artificial aid, why should not the nobler organism of a human female do the same?" (*Italics mine.*)

The author, not to misrepresent those he opposes, should have used the word *interference* instead of *assistance*. Even the beasts and savages get assistance from their mates during late pregnancy, labor, and the puerperal state, in the form of food, protection, comfort, etc., while no one denies that civilized woman in labor, naturally and physiologically requires *assistance* according to her surroundings. He might have said "assistance that directly hastens, retards, or modifies the course of labor;" but, as it is, he has started out with an unfair statement of his opponents' views. Hence his arguments, as might be expected, bear less upon the views of his real opponents than upon the extreme views he has attributed to them. He plays the part of a skilful duellist fencing with an effigy, and he plays so well and so earnestly that both his audience and himself come to believe that he has transfixed something live and substantial.

Notice how artfully, or, rather, how naturally (for he is sincere) he brings his audience to think that the physiological or natural school takes labor in animals as the model for labor in women. He commences with the statement, just quoted, about the lower animals, and, as he proceeds, repeatedly refers to them (*vide* p. 373, lines 5-7, 15-16, 20-23, 30-38; p. 375, lines 25-28, 34-35), and culminates on page 377 with the following full-fledged misrepresentation: "Finally, natural labor in woman is often compared, as I have said, with parturition in the dumb animals, and the inference is drawn that one ought not to need assistance *more than the other.*" (*Italics mine.*) He has gone too far, and made a premise out of what no one before ever thought of using as anything but an illustration, and which was so used in his first statement. But the fallacy is developed so gradually, stated so boldly, and the subject afterwards amplified so ably that the effigy becomes animated, and is vanquished with a flourish that deceives the audience into believing the real opponent honorably overcome.

Thus throughout the whole discourse are his opponents not only misrepresented in a general and imperceptible manner, but his hearers are misled by specific statements. It is maintained (p. 372, l. 24) that "a case of perfectly natural labor must be, in great part, a *hypothetical case*, or rather, it must be a case made up, so to speak, of fragments of normality, some taken from one woman, and some from others, which, when properly put together, reproduce the ideal type of a perfect specimen now almost extinct." Here are confounded the natural with the ideal. A Greek artist is putting perfect parts together in one statue, and will not allow any statues to represent natural, healthy beings which are copied entire from living individuals. But the orator is perfectly logical and true to himself, for the woman who bears children nowadays is, according to his words, the "pampered daughter of fortune, whose food is purchased with inherited gold, whose muscles languish and wither in idle inactivity, and the powers of whose spinal cord are soon exhausted" (p. 373). Again: "The muscles of the abdominal wall themselves are frequently atrophied from disuse, and perhaps deformed and enfeebled by the previous cramping and compression of corsets, belts, and skirt strings, which may have exerted their influence for years" (p. 376, l. 1). Again: "In the thin, idle, sedentary 'girl of the period,' we should no more expect to find a strong, muscular abdominal wall, etc." (p. 376, l. 7). "It seems that the reproductive organs have in some way undergone a sort of abasement or degeneration" (p. 383, l. 15). "No, I think we cannot escape the admission, civilized woman has undergone some degeneration as regards her capacity for propagation" (p. 383, fifth line from bottom).

Here we have in a new dress the old proposition that mankind is physically degenerating, and the sophistry consists in putting up the few degenerate victims of high society life in large cities as the representatives of the mass of civilized women. Let the author look elsewhere than in Washington and in large cities, and he will find plenty of healthy women in physiological labor—he might indeed have found plenty in Washington—but let him not put up an ideal labor, made up of an unnatural collocation of parts, as the physiological one to which all others must correspond.

Let us now examine in detail a few of the arguments as they

are advanced, and which are called "disturbing influences . . . almost universal." He claims that "the continuance of coitus after conception and during the greater part of pregnancy is a proceeding entirely outside the bounds of physiology, the parallel of which cannot be found in the whole animal kingdom" (p. 373, l. 3).

If it is not already known, it may easily be ascertained that both the bitch and the house cat do at times solicit intercourse after impregnation has occurred, and sometimes even after the belly has become notably enlarged. The same is often true of the human female, and why not elsewhere in the animal kingdom? Indeed, why not everywhere?

Corsets and the "artificial appendages of dress" are next cited. Corsets tend to alter the direction of the lower ribs, but just how their effects prevent the fundus from finding accommodation in the abdomen, or otherwise interfere, requires explanation. The fact is that the majority of women have not much deformed themselves by corsets, nor do they, as a rule, wear them during the later months of pregnancy, except, perhaps, for a short time each day.

He says (p. 373, l. 18), that "a woman remains 'nine days' on the bed. Do the animals wallow for nine days where *they* have been delivered? Emphatically not, even though the spot be the cool antiseptic (?) earth." (Interrogation point mine.)

It must be remembered that the life of most animals that we observe is from one-eighth to one-third the length of the life of man, and that utero-gestation, labor, involution, development of the young, etc., are also comparatively short. Then it must not be expected that a cat or a mouse, with a pregnancy of a few weeks only, should wallow for *nine* days. Two days would be a proportionate period for them, nor do they get upon two legs and carry their offspring in the other two limbs, and thus put the uterus in a dependent location with regard to the general circulation, as a woman would have to if she were to get up and help herself; but they maintain horizontal positions and keep as quiet for the first two or three days as circumstances will permit, and spend much of that time lying with or near their young. Larger animals, like cows and mares, with whom involution is slower, get up on all fours to eat, but they remain quietly near their offspring, and do not do much more in the

way of using their muscles than might the majority of mothers in bed. The mass of women in the civilized world have no bed pans, but sit up or get up to pass their excretions; and unless kept down by orders will move about in bed freely, sit up a little in bed after four or five days and get out of bed before the nine days have expired. And they do so naturally and physiologically. There need be but little real difference between the condition in the labor of the average civilized woman and that of the animal, except such as depends upon the natural difference in their organizations.

He goes on to say: "From the necessity of recumbency for some days following delivery, drainage from the uterus and vagina, by gravitation, is interfered with" (p. 373, l. 27). This assertion must fall with the last one. The necessity for *such* recumbency does not exist, except in the mind of the artificial school of accoucheurs. The woman lying on her side secures about as efficient drainage as the quadruped while standing.

The following argument is used (4th line from bottom): "The pampered daughter of fortune, whose food is purchased by 'inherited gold' has not a sufficiently 'strong nervous system and powerful muscles' like 'the animals,' 'barbaric women' and 'some of the poorer women of civilized communities.'"

If this means anything, it means that the last-mentioned class, which is by far the larger class in the world, does have the "strong nervous system and powerful muscles, by which the work of parturient labor is easily accomplished." It might here be remarked that these factors are not the sole ones upon which the ease of labor depends, particularly first labor.

On esthetic grounds, and as a means of preventing the bloating effects of what is sometimes put into the mother's stomach after confinement, and also not to be considered as captious, I will allow the argument of the binder (p. 375 to 376). Those mothers whose shoulders are fixed to the mattress for a week or so after labor, may be benefited by it as a feeble aid to that normal contraction of the abdominal muscles which would otherwise take place much better and much more efficiently through the influence of a greater freedom of motion.

An attempt is made to show (p. 380 to 382) that the diminished "seasonal variations" made by heating our houses

in winter, and by the abundance of all kinds of food at all seasons, withdraws natural influences that act upon the mother and fetus in animal life, and which are "conducive to safety during delivery and lying-in." But the argument is, of course, only applicable in a narrow belt of each temperate zone, where winter is cold and summer is hot. Toward the frigid zones it is cold for about ten months in the year and then not very warm; toward the torrid zone it is warm for about ten months and then not very cold. In temperate climates these conditions exist only in large cities and railroad centres. I should suppose that even with the best of furnaces the seasonal variations would be felt much more in our latitude, which does not contain the majority of mothers, than in other parts of the globe. Do not the diseases indicate it? Farthermore many animals avoid the "seasonal variations" by migrating. Hence the diminished season variation, being neither general among civilized women nor peculiar to civilized woman, need not longer detain us.

He insists (p. 374 and 375) that "the very means which nature has provided and designed to promote placental expulsion are, in the civilized female, taken away from her (by the nurse and physician), and hence the necessity of some artificial substitute, which is supplied and rightly applied by the hand of the accoucheur." He says (p. 373, l. 12) that "almost every lying-in woman is subjected to digital examinations. . . . "Is this a natural proceeding?" And amplifies the argument (p. 376) by showing how the labor is prolonged by the withdrawal of the mucus by the examining finger; and again (p. 377 to 380), that the erroneous teachings which the mother receives tend to make the labor unnatural. He then sums up in these words: "Do what you will, civilized women of the present day cannot escape the deleterious agency of fashions, customs, laws, rites, methods, and practices that are propagated through the instrumentality of language."

It grieves me to say that no one can deny the truth of these last statements. It grieves me more to acknowledge that these truths, the only ones remaining to be answered, throw all the blame upon the physician and nurse. But it grieves me most of all that the only uses the author can make of these truths is an argument for still further interference with labor. He says not a word about avoiding those things which thus render labor unnatural; nor hints at the responsibility of the physician of the

past for these propagated "fashions, customs, laws, rites, methods, and practices;" nor dreams of his own responsibility for future popular practices; but only advocates more interference. Cure interference by interference is the meaning of his argument. For instance, he says (p. 374, l. 16): "But there is every reason to believe that what we have learned to do artificially on this point (in securing the expulsion of the placenta) would be done by Nature in a purely physiological state." He even goes on to show how Nature would accomplish it, and tells us how Nature's means "are taken away from her," and yet proposes, as the great desideratum, "artificial substitute." Even in the management of *pathological* conditions we first study to aid the natural processes by which the conditions are relieved, and remove all obstacles to their action; and then, in case an artificial substitute is required, we give it, but not until then.

Now, having found nothing in his argument to show that parturition in the civilized world is not usually a physiological process, except as it is rendered so by the *interference of attendants*, I beg leave to use his arguments as a plea for a reform in the management of labor—a reform that will render it once more a physiological process, though hardly his ideal one. If we reform our practices and teachings now, the fashions, customs, laws, rites, methods, and practices of future generations will be corrected. As a body, we pretend to enlighten the world upon medical subjects, yet individually too many of us play the part of mystics to our patients, and are often content, even eager, to use artificial substitutes, so it saves us time and trouble, and earns us glory and wealth.

I am sorry that the observation of the author should have been so much among the "thin, idle, sedentary," and "pampered" class that his evident high honor, lofty principles, and laudable desire to benefit womankind have not prevented him from arriving at conclusions which, if generally adopted, must exert a bad influence upon the practice of the great mass of obstetricians who treat a different class of patients.

In this review I have said what I could to counteract that influence, but would be understood as combating the argument only, not the orator's "principles," for we both "agree that the main source of progress in obstetric science, as in other departments of medicine, grows out of studying and understanding Nature" (p. 371, l. 31).

